

# No Regrets

GORDON WILLIAMS

SHE WAS SURROUNDED by faces but only interested in her own. A silent audience of black and white photographs – previous occupants of this room, the nearly famous and the forgotten – looked on as she applied her make-up. Three hours at the hairdresser's that afternoon had changed her grey roots to the same auburn colour as the rest of her hair, now set in mid-length curls. Blusher completed, she applied eye shadow and mascara as intermittent laughter rose in distant muffled waves beyond the room. She brought her face closer to the mirror to confirm she had finished her lashes, put the little black brush back in its case on the dressing table and picked up her lipstick as another wave of laughter broke past the corridor outside the door. A pout, some heightened local redness, another pout and a tissue gently pressed between her glistening lips. There was more laughter, music starting and people clapping. Sideways on, left and right, she nodded in agreement with the face looking back.

A last look as the music and applause faded away. She stood and did a half-twirl to each side, admiring the reflection of her glittering gold strapless dress as it sparkled, lit by the circle of pink lights surrounding the mirror, before holding the dress with both hands behind her to ease herself into the brown leather armchair. She switched off the lights around the mirror but the harshness of the fluorescent ceiling light left the small room, with its windowless magnolia walls and brown carpet, looking as ordinary as it was, so she switched the mirror lights back on and put her tights-clad feet up on the dressing table.

Resting her hands on the cigarette-burned arms of the armchair, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath in.

Before she could breathe out somebody knocked at the door and said, "Debbie?"

She opened her eyes and asked, "Who's that?"

"Tommy. Tommy Nash," the voice answered in a thick Scouse accent.

She said, "Shit," quietly to herself, took her feet off the dressing table and went to the door, where her black cashmere coat hung on a hook. She unlocked the door and saw a tall, overweight man, with thin hair greying at the sides, grinning and taking up most of the doorway.

He wore a dark suit with a purple bow tie and asked, "How's it goin', kid?"

"No better for seeing you," she answered, and walked back to her chair as Tommy followed her.

"I saw your name on the bill and thought I hadn't seen much of you recently," Tommy said, "although in that dress I'm not sure."

"How did it go tonight?" Debbie asked as she sat down beside her mirror.

Tommy bent forward to unfasten his bow tie and top shirt button.

"Gorra few laughs," he replied. "Nobody threw anything. The usual Friday night crowd. I haven't been here for a while but at least they asked me back. When was you here last?"

"Before Christmas," said Debbie. "I usually go down well here. Do the songs they all know. Keep 'em happy."

She leaned over the arm of her chair and pointed to the room's other chair – black leatherette, torn at both top corners – by the door.

"Sit down," she told her guest. "I'm on after the bingo so I've got nothing to do for twenty minutes. Even talking to you's better than sitting here on my own."

"Thanks, kid. It's great to feel wanted," Tommy said, rolling his bow tie around his hand and stuffing it in his jacket pocket.

"Sorry, Tommy, but it's been a bad week," Debbie said.

"I wondered why you had a face like a smacked arse,"

Tommy said as he sat down. "So what's happened then? House repossessed? World War Three? Got pregnant?"

"No, you silly bugger. Did you see *The Des O'Connor Show* on Tuesday?"

"No... er, Tuesday... I was doing a stag night in Preston. I did the bluest stuff I know and it went down great."

"You don't usually do really blue stuff..."

"I give 'em what they want, like you do. I couldn't get away with that here but I was bluer than an Eskimo's varicose veins last Tuesday – they were so pissed they'd have laughed at anything. So what was wrong with Des O'Connor? I've watched him meself sometimes but he's never spoiled my week."

"It wasn't Des," Debbie replied, leaning back into the armchair. "That bastard Marty Mann was on his show. I'd hoped I'd never see his face again, even if it did look like it had been ironed. He must have had those Botox injections. And his hair was darker than when I last saw him – and that was over twenty years ago."

"Who's Marty Mann? I've never heard of him."

"I wish I'd never heard of him. We used to be in a band together a long time ago, called Daybreak..."

"I remember them – I must have been in short pants at the time..."

"Well they must have been bloody tight on you, 'cos you're about the same age as me."

"How old's that, then?"

"Thirty-nine. Just like my mother: she was thirty-nine for so long I eventually overtook her."

"Well if you knew this fella over twenty years ago, you must have been..."

"A child star, like Shirley Temple," Debbie interrupted.

"So what's happenin' with this Marty fella?" Tommy changed the subject.

"He's come back to Britain for a tour and to promote his new CD."

"What's wrong with that?" Tommy asked.

"He said on Des's show that he was hoping to re-form

Daybreak. That was the first I'd heard about it and I was the lead singer. He never asked me."

"It could be worth a few quid if they re-form. Better than singing in places like this," said Tommy as he waved his arm about. "What's the problem?"

"That two-faced creep Marty's the problem. All the trouble he caused when we split up. He cleared off to Australia while the rest of us had to work to pay off the contract we were stuck with. I'd never heard of him for years but they said he'd made a name for himself there..."

"Is he big Down Under?" said Tommy.

"I could tell you... but so could a lot of women. I should have known better," Debbie shook her head, her auburn curls swinging. "When we first started we spent three years driving around in a Transit, playing every crummy gig we could get before we got signed up by a record company. Marty could play guitar OK but he wasn't much of a singer. And he was great at hustling. That and chasing women. He managed to combine business and pleasure by charming the knickers off a PA to some record company boss to get us an audition. When they signed us it was like Christmas every day: three hit records, an album, concerts – we were on *Top of the Pops* four times..."

"I must have seen yer – in me short pants an' all..."

"...interviews, meeting famous people – I actually met Shirley Bassey and Cliff Richard. I was on cloud nine for eighteen months. Then it all ended," Debbie said through her teeth.

"How come?"

"Marty and me had been an item for over a year. It was the best year of my life – everything was going so well. We rented a house in the country where nobody knew us – it would have been bad for the image if Marty had a girlfriend or a wife. Only those in the band knew about me and Marty. I thought I was the one to stop him wandering... but I was wrong."

"What was he up to?"

"I found him with one of our backing singers before a gig in Leeds. And she was supposed to be going out with Tony, our drummer. They were in the dressing room but they were using it like the undressing room. I was hitting Marty with my handbag,

then Tony heard the row and came in, and he started hitting him as well. And Marty's still trying to get his clothes on..."

"I wish I'd been there..."

"I wish I hadn't. We still had to do the gig that night. I had to sing a duet with Marty ... called 'Forever True'..."

"I remember it," Tommy started singing. "*All my life I'll spend with you – 'cos I'll be forever true...*"

"Stick to telling jokes, Tommy. I was singing three feet away from Marty – I could see his bruises from there, even under his make-up. I had to smile and sing through gritted teeth for an hour. I still sounded better than you. I heard there was another fight in the dressing room afterwards, but I'd already cleared off by then. It was in the papers two days later. I still remember the headline: *Daybreak Up.*"

"So it all ended – just like that?" Tommy asked.

"Our manager tried to get us back together, telling us we still had six months of our contract to run but there was no chance: Jeff, our bass player, went into rehab for his coke habit and Tony ended up in detox in Withington. All the problems we'd been trying to hide caught up with us. When the papers found out there was another headline: *Daybreak Down.*"

"So you had musical and personal differences, then?"

"You could say that. We only talked to each other through lawyers afterwards and I haven't seen any of the band for years – not till I saw Marty on the telly last Tuesday."

"What happened to all the money you made from the records and the concerts and that?"

"I wish I knew. The record company wouldn't pay us, saying we'd breached our contract. I got a lawyer to look at it; he said it was an unusual contract and we should have had somebody check it over before we signed it. That's how naïve we all were then – we were over the moon just to get a record deal. And our manager said we owed him money 'cos the rest of the tour was cancelled. I spent two years doing gigs in pubs and clubs – anywhere – to get enough money together to pay off what they said I owed. They were the worst gigs I ever did – singing to the sound of knives and forks scraping on plates because people were more interested in eating than listening to me..."

"I know, I've done it. I bet you've never played to an empty club like I did once: some place near Chester. I asked the manager if there was any point in going on and he said I wouldn't get paid if I didn't. So I did an hour in this empty club telling jokes to candles flickering on the tables. Didn't get many laughs that night."

"I've played some real dives myself but I've always had a few people in the audience. I was still calling myself *The Voice of Daybreak* then, even though I hated it, because it was the only way I could get any gigs. Since then I've kept quiet about it. Marty didn't bother trying to pay off what he owed – he just declared himself bankrupt and scarpered to Australia, the spineless little shit..."

"So you're not bitter about it then?" said Tommy.

"I didn't think I was till I saw him on telly the other night. All the trouble he caused and then he just ran away. And now he wants us to make up and be friends again." Debbie shook her head, and curls, again.

"So what's wrong with doing it just for the money?"

"I don't do this for the money now. I do it because I want to do it. I didn't bother while the kids were growing up but I had to start again a few years ago. Singing while I was doing the ironing wasn't enough. I had to be out there," she pointed at the door, "singing."

"You must've married a rich fella if you could stay at home all that time."

"I went to see an accountant to help me sort out the money problems after Daybreak finished – the tax and the contractual obligations. It was good to meet somebody normal for a change. Then I married him."

"I've got the same accountant as Ken Dodd," said Tommy. "He recommended him to me. Before that I thought because I lived on the coast in Southport I didn't have to pay money to the Inland Revenue."

"The old ones are the best, Tommy."

"There's always someone who hasn't heard 'em, thank God. You know they brought in self-assessment a few years ago? I

thought of it long before they did. The accountant said he'd save me a lorra time – about two years if I got caught."

Debbie smiled for the first time that night, stood up and twirled.

"What do you think of my dress?"

"A bit smart for this place, innit?"

"It's one of Shirley Bassey's." Debbie twirled again and sat down, easing her dress into her chair with both hands. "Dave bought it for me at an auction. He wouldn't tell me what it cost but it'll end up as an allowable expense. I put it on tonight to cheer myself up." She pointed to the clock on the wall and said, "I'm on in five minutes."

"Go out there and slay 'em, kid. Don't let this Marty fella get to yer."

"His agent 'phoned me yesterday. Some smooth-talking Southerner. Asked me if I'd seen Marty on the telly. Said he was doing a comeback UK tour, and there'd been a lot of interest in the possibility of Daybreak reforming and doing a tour and a CD. The other members of the band had already agreed and they wanted me to consider it."

"So what did you say?"

"I let him keep talking. And when he told me how much they'd pay me I couldn't say anything because my mouth was still wide open."

"How much was that?"

"Enough for me and Dave to retire on. The agent fella kept talking and asked me if I'd heard Marty's new CD. I told him in Marty's case it stood for Compact Dick and there was more chance of John Lennon re-forming The Beatles than there was of me ever singing with Marty again. Then I cut him off and I've heard nothing from him since."

"Was that a wise career move?" Tommy asked.

"I don't care. No amount of money would make me go near that two-timing bastard again. He's just a third-rate singer who ruined things for me and everybody else."

"And he's on the telly and you're singing in Salford. Couldn't you call his agent back and say you've reconsidered?"

"I'd rather be mixing with the likes of strippers and drag

artists and you and all the other comedians you meet in this business than have to see Marty again.”

“You could be right, kid,” said Tommy. “There’s worse things than doing this for a living – I know, ‘cos I’ve done ‘em. After fourteen years on the assembly line at Ford’s I wake up every morning – and some afternoons – and thank God I’m still in this business. I might not be Billy Connolly but even dyin’ on your arse in Burnley beats shift work at Halewood.”

Debbie turned and took a mouthful of water from a glass on the dressing table, stood up to gargle and spat into the hand basin to her right. She bent towards the mirror to apply a final touch of lipstick, then climbed into her sparkling gold high heels.

“You’ve still gotta face like a smacked arse,” Tommy said, standing up. “Go on – give us a smile, kid.”

Debbie pulled a face in reply.

“I suppose a fuck’s out of the question then tonight?” Tommy asked.

“Sod off. I’m on in two minutes.”

“That’s all I need some nights.”

“You’re still the same, Tommy. And so are the jokes. Sorry, but it’s show time... and tonight I’m going to be... Shirley Bassey. Again.”

“Go on, kid – break a leg,” said Tommy as he stood up.

“I’ll break yours if you don’t get out of my way,” Debbie said and walked to the door.

Tommy followed her through and waited as she locked the dark blue door with its shiny yellow star stuck on above the words *Artiste’s Dressing Room* and bent to put the key in her shoe. They walked along the corridor of cream-painted brick walls decorated with more framed black-and-white photographs towards the sound of voices at the side of the stage where the bingo prizes were being given out. Tommy told her to break her other leg as she took several deep breaths and waited. The compere, thin and balding in a charcoal suit, frilly shirt and lilac bow tie, gave out the last of the prizes and walked offstage to greet her.

“Hiya, darlin’,” he said as leaned forward to kiss Debbie’s cheek, close enough for her to smell the lager on his breath and



feel his moustache tickling her skin. "You in good form?" he asked. "The place is full and they're ready for you."

Debbie tried to smile; she didn't speak but kept on taking slow, deep breaths as the compere walked back to the microphone at the centre of the stage. The house lights went down and the footlights brightened to show cigarette smoke curling upwards around the compere's legs.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the compere began, "we're always very pleased to invite this lady to our club. She's a fabulous singer and a great favourite of ours, so please give a big welcome to... Debbie Clarke."

The band – three middle-aged men in dinner jackets squeezed onto the left hand side of the stage with their guitar, organ and drums – starts into 'Hey, Big Spender' and she walks onstage to lively applause.

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen," she tells them as the intro fades, "it's always good to be back here. I'm going to start this evening with a song you all know – 'Memory' from *Cats*."

Streisand may do it better but she never played Salford Labour Club. It's as good a version as they've heard here, followed by 'I Will Always Love You', with notes as long as Whitney ever held. The applause allows her to pause for breath, then she waits for two men carrying trays of drinks from the bar to reach their table near the front. The spotlight makes her gold dress sparkle and stand out from the burgundy curtain behind her. She lifts the microphone from its stand and starts into 'Cry Me A River', deep and heartfelt, walking slowly across the stage. The guitarist takes his solo and she looks out at the audience – four rows of crowded tables stretching away from the stage to the bar at the back – before rejoining the band for the last verse. When they finish clapping she tells them:

"This is the most beautiful love song ever written by somebody from Salford... or anywhere else for that matter," introducing Ewan McColl's 'The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face'. The respectful silence holds between its slow lyrics as nobody dares to lift a glass and spoil the effect.

When the applause subsides she does a twirl, asks:

"Do you like the dress?" and gets several wolf whistles in

reply. "It's one of Shirley Bassey's that my husband bought for me. I've always wanted one." Then she leans towards the organist and tells him, "I bet you've always wanted to get into one of Shirley's dresses." When they finish laughing she tells her audience, "This is one of Shirley's dresses and this... is one of her songs," launching into 'As Long As He Needs Me' with full dramatic effect, leading to a climax that demands applause.

"Do you want some more of Shirley's songs?" she asks when the clapping ends.

Without waiting for a reply she nods to the band, who start their intro to 'Hey, Big Spender' and she gives it everything, shaking Shirley's dress and its contents before leaning suggestively over two startled men at a table near the stage. Their wives are laughing and the applause allows her to take some more deep breaths before launching into 'What Kind Of Fool Am I?', slowing the tempo again to prepare herself for the full-on vocal assault of 'I Who Have Nothing'. The applause gets louder and some of the audience are cheering.

She takes another bow and announces, "Ladies and gentlemen – thank you for being such a lovely audience. I'm going to finish off this evening with a song made famous by a woman that the French called *The Little Sparrow*, but I'm going to do the version that Shirley did a long time ago – in English, because I don't speak French and I know that not many people in Salford do, either. Edith Piaf was tiny and she wasn't good-looking, but she lived life as it's meant to be lived – to the full. This is 'No Regrets'."

A short intro and straight in... *No, no regrets...* the warbled phrasing just like Piaf's, even without the French accent ...*No, we will have no regrets ...* that strength and that vulnerability as she dominates each verse, each chorus... *One last kiss, shrug and sigh...* she gives it everything and they're transfixed by the intensity that she generates... *No regrets.... even though it's... good... bye.*

A stepped crescendo that stretches her voice to its triumphant limits. The big finish and then some. The applause surrounds her and continues for long enough to demand an encore, as she stands bowing in the spotlight, catching her breath and hoping that the tears and mascara running down both cheeks haven't spoiled her finale.